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SUBJECT: BJP SET TO LEAD ITS FIRST GOVERNMENT IN SOUTH INDIA

REF: A) CHENNAI 662, B) CHENNAI 629, C) CHENNAI 620, D) CHENNAI 611

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Union Cabinet decided on November 8 to end "President's Rule" in the South Indian state of Karnataka, paving the way for the BJP to lead a governing coalition -- the first time that the BJP has led a government in a southern state. The BJP will join the JD(S) to govern, in a reconstruction of the coalition that collapsed in October. Various factions within the JD(S) are now scrambling for cabinet seats, while Karnataka's Congress Party leaders fume about their national leadership's decision to allow the BJP-JD(S) coalition back into power. Few observers expect this version of the BJP-JD(S) coalition to last more than six months, but even if it lasts longer, political in-fighting are likely to absorb most of the government's energy, preventing it from focusing on much-needed improvements to Bangalore's crumbling infrastructure. End summary.

Karnataka legislators parade to end president's rule

¶2. (U) The Union Cabinet moved on November 8 to revoke "President's Rule" in Karnataka, which had put the administration of the state into the hands of the Congress Party-appointed governor following the collapse in October of the state's governing BJP-JD(S) coalition. The Cabinet's decision followed a November 6 political stunt that saw 125 of Karnataka's BJP and JD(S) legislators parade before President Patel in Delhi to demonstrate that the coalition had more than the 113 seats necessary to form a majority in Karnataka's legislature.

¶3. (SBU) Karnataka Governor Rameshwar Thakur's office confirmed to us that the governor had sent a letter inviting the BJP to form a government, suggesting November 12 as the date for a swearing-in ceremony. B.S. Yedyurappa, the Deputy Chief Minister in the government that collapsed in October, will become the new Chief Minister (CM). When sworn in, he will become the first BJP member to take a top office in South India.

Karnataka Congress leaders unhappy

¶4. (SBU) Karnataka's Congress politicians are not happy with the decision made by the party's national leadership. One former state-level minister told us that the BJP would now consolidate its position in the state. He said that he feared that the BJP would be able to make enough money while in power to give Congress a "tough fight" in the next election, even if the new coalition lasts only a few months. A former state CM agreed, adding that the BJP would now start filling key positions in the state bureaucracy, many of which are currently vacant, with its supporters.

All not well within the JD(S)

¶5. (U) Meanwhile, factional fighting with the JD(S) leadership continues. Most party members seem to support the coalition with the BJP while fearing that the saffron party may poach voters from the Lingayat caste who currently support the JD(S). (Yedyurappa is a Lingayat.) Two of the JD(S)'s most influential figures, party chief Deve Gowda, and his son, former CM Kumaraswamy, have yet to comment publicly on the revocation of "President's Rule," suggesting their less-than-enthusiastic support for the reinvigoration of their party's coalition with the BJP.

¶6. (SBU) A dissident JD(S) legislator gave us an additional reason for the lack of comment from the party's most visible figures: a family dispute. He told us that a fight between Kumarasamy and his older brother (Revana, also a former state minister) prevented their family from offering any statement of support to the "new" coalition. Both brothers, he said, want to become the Deputy CM in the BJP-led cabinet, which is causing fissures within the JD(S). Most of the party's legislators, he claimed, support Kumaraswamy's candidacy, but Deve Gowda prefers Revana.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) While most observers seem to believe that disputes within the coalition will prevent it from surviving longer than six months, Yedyurappa has proven himself to be an adroit politician who may well be able to hold the fragile coalition together for longer than that. What seems clear, however, is that managing competing demands and political intrigue within the coalition will take up much of his time and energy, preventing him from focusing on critical issues like improving Bangalore's crumbling infrastructure.

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